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**by Steven Holzner, PhD**

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# Contents at a Glance

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Part I: Getting Started with Physics .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Chapter 1: Reviewing Physics Basics .....	5
Chapter 2: The Big Three: Displacement, Velocity, and Acceleration .....	23
Chapter 3: Vectors: Knowing Where You're Headed .....	39
<b>Part II: May the Forces Be with You .....</b>	<b>57</b>
Chapter 4: Applying Force .....	59
Chapter 5: Working with Inclined Planes .....	77
Chapter 6: Round and Round: Circular Motion .....	95
<b>Part III: Being Energetic: Work .....</b>	<b>115</b>
Chapter 7: Working the Physics Way .....	117
Chapter 8: Getting Things to Move: Momentum and Kinetic Energy .....	139
Chapter 9: Winding It Up: Rotational Motion and Torque .....	159
Chapter 10: Getting Dizzy with Rotational Dynamics .....	175
Chapter 11: Simple Harmonic Motion .....	193
<b>Part IV: Obeying the Laws of Thermodynamics .....</b>	<b>211</b>
Chapter 12: You're Getting Warm: Thermodynamics .....	213
Chapter 13: Under Pressure: From Solid to Liquid to Gas .....	229
Chapter 14: All about Heat and Work .....	247
<b>Part V: Zap: Electricity .....</b>	<b>267</b>
Chapter 15: Static Electricity: Electrons at Rest .....	269
Chapter 16: Electrons in Motion: Circuits .....	289
<b>Part VI: The Part of Tens .....</b>	<b>309</b>
Chapter 17: Ten Common Mistakes People Make When Solving Problems .....	311
Chapter 18: Ten Online Physics Tutorials and Resources .....	315
<b>Index .....</b>	<b>317</b>



# Table of Contents

## ***Introduction* ..... 1**

About This Book .....	1
Foolish Assumptions .....	1
Icons Used in This Book .....	2
Beyond the Book .....	2
Where to Go from Here .....	2

## ***Part 1: Getting Started with Physics*..... 3**

### **Chapter 1: Reviewing Physics Basics . . . . . 5**

Measuring the Universe .....	5
Putting Scientific Notation to Work .....	7
Converting between Units .....	9
Converting through Multiple Units .....	11
Converting Times .....	13
Counting Significant Figures .....	14
Coming Prepared with Some Algebra .....	15
Being Prepared with Trigonometry .....	17
Answers to Problems about Physics Basics .....	19

### **Chapter 2: The Big Three: Displacement, Velocity, and Acceleration . . . . . 23**

From Point A to B: Displacement .....	23
Reading That Speedometer .....	25
Putting Pedal to Metal: Acceleration .....	26
Connecting Acceleration, Time, and Displacement .....	29
Connecting Velocity, Acceleration, and Displacement .....	32
Answers to Problems about Displacement, Velocity, and Acceleration .....	34

### **Chapter 3: Vectors: Knowing Where You're Headed . . . . . 39**

Creating a Vector .....	39
Understanding Vector Components .....	41
Finding a Vector's Components .....	42
Finding a Vector's Magnitude and Direction .....	44
Adding Vectors Together .....	46
Handling Velocity as a Vector .....	50
Answers to Problems about Vectors .....	52

***Part II: May the Forces Be with You ..... 57*****Chapter 4: Applying Force. ....59**

Newton's First Law of Motion .....	59
Newton's Second Law of Motion .....	60
Force Is a Vector .....	63
Calculating Net Force and Acceleration .....	65
Sorting Out Weight and Mass.....	67
The Balancing Act of Equilibrium.....	69
Newton's Third Law of Motion .....	70
Answers to Problems about Force .....	71

**Chapter 5: Working with Inclined Planes .....77**

Breaking Ramps Up into Vectors.....	77
Acceleration and Inclined Planes .....	80
Running Down Ramps: Speed .....	81
Friction on Inclined Planes.....	82
Starting from zero: Static friction .....	83
Already in motion: Kinetic friction .....	83
Static Friction along Ramps .....	84
Kinetic Friction along Ramps.....	86
Acceleration along Ramps Including Friction.....	87
Answers to Problems about Inclined Planes .....	89

**Chapter 6: Round and Round: Circular Motion .....95**

Converting between Angles.....	95
Period and Frequency.....	97
Getting into Angular Velocity.....	98
Whipping Around with Angular Acceleration.....	100
Connecting Angular Velocity and Angular Acceleration to Angles.....	102
Connecting Angular Acceleration and Angle to Angular Velocity.....	104
Handling Centripetal Acceleration .....	105
Getting Forceful: Centripetal Force .....	106
Answers to Problems about Circular Motion .....	108

***Part III: Being Energetic: Work ..... 115*****Chapter 7: Working the Physics Way .....117**

A Different Kind of Work.....	117
Dealing with the Net Force .....	119
Getting Energetic: Kinetic Energy.....	121
Getting Kinetic Energy from Work.....	122
Storing Your Energy: Potential Energy .....	124
Powering It Up.....	126
Answers to Problems about Work.....	129



## **Chapter 8: Getting Things to Move: Momentum and Kinetic Energy . . . . . 139**

Acting on Impulse .....	139
Getting Some Momentum .....	140
Relating Impulse and Momentum .....	141
Conserving Momentum .....	143
Conserving Kinetic Energy — or Not .....	145
Collisions in Two Dimensions .....	147
Answers to Problems about Momentum and Kinetic Energy .....	151

## **Chapter 9: Winding It Up: Rotational Motion and Torque . . . . . 159**

Finding Tangential Speed .....	159
Targeting Tangential Acceleration .....	162
Angular Velocity as a Vector .....	163
Angular Acceleration as a Vector .....	164
Doing the Twist: Torque .....	165
The Balancing Act: Rotational Equilibrium .....	167
Answers to Problems about Rotational Motion and Torque .....	170

## **Chapter 10: Getting Dizzy with Rotational Dynamics . . . . . 175**

Putting Newton on Wheels .....	175
Moments of Inertia for Everyone .....	177
Doing Some Rotational Work .....	180
Round and Round: Rotational Kinetic Energy .....	181
Working with Ramps Again .....	183
Can't Stop This: Angular Momentum .....	185
Answers to Problems about Rotational Dynamics .....	187

## **Chapter 11: Simple Harmonic Motion . . . . . 193**

Hooking into Hooke's Law .....	193
Simply Simple Harmonic Motion .....	195
Getting Periodic .....	197
Considering Velocity .....	198
Figuring the Acceleration .....	199
Bouncing Around with Springs .....	201
Talking about Energy .....	202
Following the Ticktock of Pendulums .....	203
Answers to Problems about Simple Harmonic Motion .....	205

## ***Part IV: Obeying the Laws of Thermodynamics . . . . . 211***

### **Chapter 12: You're Getting Warm: Thermodynamics . . . . . 213**

Converting between Temperature Scales .....	213
Getting Bigger: Linear Expansion .....	215
Plumping It Up: Volume Expansion .....	217
Getting Specific with Heat Capacity .....	219
Changes of Phase: Latent Heat .....	221
Answers to Problems about Thermodynamics .....	223

**Chapter 13: Under Pressure: From Solid to Liquid to Gas . . . . . 229**

How Heat Flows: Convection .....	229
How Heat Is Produced: Conduction .....	231
How Heat Is Produced: Radiation .....	234
A Biggie: Avogadro's Number .....	236
Ideally Speaking: The Ideal Gas Law .....	238
Molecules in Motion .....	239
Answers to Problems about Pressure .....	241

**Chapter 14: All about Heat and Work . . . . . 247**

The First Law of Thermodynamics .....	247
Constant Pressure: Isobaric Processes .....	248
Constant Volume: Isochoric Processes .....	250
Constant Temperature: Isothermal Processes .....	252
At Constant Heat: Adiabatic .....	253
The Direction of Heat: The Second Law of Thermodynamics .....	256
Making Heat Work: Heat Engines .....	257
Maximum Efficiency: Carnot Heat Engines .....	260
The Third Law of Thermodynamics .....	260
Answers to Problems about Heat and Work .....	261

***Part V: Zap: Electricity . . . . . 267*****Chapter 15: Static Electricity: Electrons at Rest. . . . . 269**

Talking about Electric Charges .....	269
Getting Forceful with Charges .....	270
Electrical Forces Are Vectors .....	272
Force at a Distance: Electric Fields .....	273
Easy Electric Field: Parallel Plate Capacitors .....	275
Ramping Up Some Voltage .....	277
Electric Potential from Point Charges .....	279
Answers to Problems about Static Electricity .....	281

**Chapter 16: Electrons in Motion: Circuits . . . . . 289**

Electrons in a Whirl: Current .....	289
Giving You Some Resistance: Ohm's Law .....	290
Powering It Up .....	292
One after the Other: Series Circuits .....	293
All for One: Parallel Circuits .....	295
The Whole Story: Kirchhoff's Rules .....	297
Answers to Problems about Circuits .....	300

## ***Part VI: The Part of Tens* ..... 309**

### **Chapter 17: Ten Common Mistakes People Make**

#### **When Solving Problems ..... 311**

Mixing Units.....	311
Expressing the Answer in the Wrong Units.....	311
Swapping Radians and Degrees.....	311
Getting Sines and Cosines Mixed Up.....	312
Not Treating Vectors as Vectors .....	312
Neglecting Latent Heat.....	312
Getting Refraction Angles Wrong .....	312
Getting the Signs Wrong in Kirchhoff Loops.....	313
Adding Resistors Incorrectly .....	313
Using the Wrong Rays in Ray Diagrams.....	314

#### **Chapter 18: Ten Online Physics Tutorials and Resources ..... 315**

The Physics Classroom.....	315
ThinkQuest.....	315
HyperPhysics .....	315
Roman Goc's Physics Tutorial.....	315
Physics 24/7 Tutorial .....	316
University of Guelph's Physics Tutorial .....	316
Tutor4Physics.....	316
Kenneth R. Koehler's Hypertextbook .....	316
Fear of Physics's Problem Solver .....	316
Vector Resolver .....	316

## ***Index* ..... 317**



# Introduction

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**P**hysics is about the world and everything in it. Physics describes that world and the kinds of things that take place in it. Sometimes, however, physics seems like an imposition from outside — a requirement you have to get through.

That's a shame, because it's *your* world that physics describes. Under the burden of physics problems, though, things can get tough. That's where this book comes in, because it's designed to let you tackle those problems with ease.

Kirchhoff's laws? No problem. Carnot engines? No worries. This book addresses these topics and more. After you're done reading, you'll be a problem-solving pro.

## About This Book

This book is crammed with physics problems, which is the idea; it's designed to show you solutions for the kinds of problems you may encounter in physics classes.

In this book, you can find solutions to problems similar to the ones you're asked to solve elsewhere. And when you see how it's done, solving similar problems should be a breeze.

Many books have endless conventions that you have to learn before you can start reading. Not this one. In fact, all you need to know is that new terms are given in italics, like *this*, when they're introduced. You should also know that vectors, which are those items that have both a magnitude and a direction, are given in bold, like this: **B**.

## Foolish Assumptions

I'm assuming that you're using this book in conjunction with a physics class or textbook, because this book keeps the derivation of physical formulas to a minimum. The emphasis here is on solving problems, not deriving formulas. So some knowledge of the physics you're going to be using here is helpful. This book is designed to help you with the nitty-gritty, not to introduce the topics from scratch.

You should also know some algebra. You don't need to be an algebra pro, but you should know how to move items from one side of an equation to another and how to solve for values. Take a look at the discussion in Chapter 1 if you're unsure.

You also need a little knowledge of trigonometry, but not much. Again, take a look at the discussion in Chapter 1, where all the trig you need to know — a grasp of sine and cosine — is reviewed in full.

## Icons Used in This Book



You find a few icons in this book, and here's what they mean:

This icon points out helpful hints, ideas, or shortcuts that save you time or that give you alternative ways to think about a particular concept.



This icon marks something to remember, such as a law of physics or a particularly juicy equation.



This icon means that what follows is technical, insider stuff. You don't have to read it if you don't want to, but if you want to become a physics pro (and who doesn't?), take a look.



This icon highlights examples that show you how to work each type of problem.

## Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this product also comes with some access-anywhere goodies on the web. When you need a quick physics refresher, check out the free Cheat Sheet at [www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/physics1workbook](http://www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/physics1workbook). There you'll find handy equations, the values of important constants, and common mistakes to avoid.

You can find additional information about physics in some articles that supplement this book. Head to [www.dummies.com/extras/physics1workbook](http://www.dummies.com/extras/physics1workbook) for articles that explain how friction is a force; the relationship between kinetic and potential energy; the first law of thermodynamics; the relationship between electricity and magnets; and ten important physics concepts.

## Where to Go from Here

You're ready to jump into Chapter 1. You don't have to start there, of course. You can read this book in any order you like instead of reading it from beginning to end. But if you want some important, general, problem-solving background, take a look at Chapter 1 first.

## Part I

# Getting Started with Physics



Visit [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) for free access to great Dummies content online.

### ***In this part . . .***

- ✓ Grasp fundamental physics measurements, scientific notation, and converting among units, distances, and time.
- ✓ Master the motion of displacement, velocity, and acceleration.
- ✓ Point yourself in the right direction with vectors.



# Chapter 1

## Reviewing Physics Basics

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Laying down measurements
- ▶ Simplifying with scientific notation
- ▶ Practicing conversions
- ▶ Drawing on algebra and trigonometry

**T**his chapter gets the ball rolling by discussing some fundamental physics measurements. At its root, physics is all about making measurements (and using those measurements as the basis of predictions), so it's the perfect place to start! I also walk you through the process of converting measurements from one unit to another, and I show you how to apply math skills to physics problems.

## *Measuring the Universe*

A great deal of physics has to do with making measurements — that's the way all physics gets started. For that reason, physics uses a number of measurement systems, such as the CGS (centimeter-gram-second) system and the MKS (meter-kilogram-second) system. You also use the standard English system of inches and feet and so on — that's the FPI (foot-pound-inch) system.



In physics, most measurements have units, such as meters or seconds. For example, when you measure how far and how fast a hockey puck slid, you need to measure both the distance in centimeters and the time in seconds.

For reference, Table 1-1 gives you the primary units of measurement in the MKS system.

Table 1-1                      MKS Units of Measurement		
<i>Measurement</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
Length	meter	m
Mass	kilogram	kg
Time	second	s or sec
Force	newton	N
Energy	joule	J

(continued)

**Table 1-1 (continued)**

<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>
Pressure	pascal	P
Electric current	ampere	A
Magnetism	tesla	T
Electric charge	coulomb	C

These are the measuring sticks that will become familiar to you as you solve problems and triumph over the math in this workbook. Also for reference, Table 1-2 shows the primary units of measurement (and their abbreviations) in the CGS system. (Don't bother memorizing the ones you're not familiar with now; you can come back to them later as needed.)

**Table 1-2 CGS Units of Measurement**

<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>
Length	centimeter	cm
Mass	gram	g
Time	second	s or sec
Force	dyne	dyn
Energy	erg	erg
Pressure	barye	Ba
Electric current	biot	Bi
Magnetism	gauss	G
Electric charge	franklin	Fr



- Q.** You're told to measure the length of a race car track using the MKS system. What unit(s) will your measurement be in?
- A.** The correct answer is meters. The unit of length in the MKS system is the meter.

- 1.** You're told to measure the mass of a marble using the CGS system. What unit(s) will your measurement be in?

**Solve It**

- 2.** You're asked to measure the time it takes the moon to circle the Earth using the MKS system. What will your measurement's units be?

**Solve It**



Check out this practice question about scientific notation:



**Q.** What is 0.000037 in scientific notation?

**A.** The correct answer is  $3.7 \times 10^{-5}$ . You have to move the decimal point five times to the right to get 3.7.

---

**5.** What is 0.0043 in scientific notation?

*Solve It*

---

**6.** What is 430,000.0 in scientific notation?

*Solve It*

---

**7.** What is 0.00000056 in scientific notation?

*Solve It*

---

**8.** What is 6,700.0 in scientific notation?

*Solve It*

## Converting between Units

Physics problems frequently ask you to convert between different units of measurement. For example, you may measure the number of feet your toy car goes in three minutes and thus be able to calculate the speed of the car in feet per minute, but that's not a standard unit of measure, so you need to convert feet per minute to miles per hour, or meters per second, or whatever the physics problem asks for.

For another example, suppose you have 180 seconds — how much is that in minutes? You know that there are 60 seconds in a minute, so 180 seconds equals three minutes. Here are some common conversions between units:

- ✓ 1 m = 100 cm = 1,000 mm (millimeters)
- ✓ 1 km (kilometer) = 1,000 m
- ✓ 1 kg (kilogram) = 1,000 g (grams)
- ✓ 1 N (newton) =  $10^5$  dynes
- ✓ 1 J (joule) =  $10^7$  ergs
- ✓ 1 P (pascal) = 10 Ba
- ✓ 1 A (amp) = 0.1 Bi
- ✓ 1 T (tesla) =  $10^4$  G (gauss)
- ✓ 1 C (coulomb) =  $2.9979 \times 10^9$  Fr

The conversion between CGS and MKS almost always involves factors of 10 only, so converting between the two is simple. But what about converting to and from the FPI and other systems of measurement? Here are some handy conversions that you can come back to as needed:

### ✓ Length:

- 1 m = 100 cm
- 1 km = 1,000 m
- 1 in (inch) = 2.54 cm
- 1 m = 39.37 in
- 1 mile = 5,280 ft = 1.609 km
- 1 Å (angstrom) =  $10^{-10}$  m

### ✓ Mass:

- 1 kg = 1,000 g
- 1 slug = 14.59 kg
- 1 u (atomic mass unit) =  $1.6605 \times 10^{-27}$  kg

✓ **Force:**

- 1 lb (pound) = 4.448 N
- 1 N =  $10^5$  dynes
- 1 N = 0.2248 lb

✓ **Energy:**

- 1 J =  $10^7$  ergs
- 1 J = 0.7376 ft-lb
- 1 BTU (British thermal unit) = 1,055 J
- 1 kWh (kilowatt hour) =  $3.600 \times 10^6$  J
- 1 eV (electron volt) =  $1.602 \times 10^{-19}$  J

✓ **Power:**

- 1 hp (horsepower) = 550 ft-lb/s
- 1 W (watt) = 0.7376 ft-lb/s

Because conversions are such an important part of physics problems, and because you have to keep track of them so carefully, there's a systematic way of handling conversions: You multiply by a conversion constant that equals 1, such that the units you don't want cancel out.



**Q.** A ball drops 5 meters. How many centimeters did it drop?

**A.** The correct answer is 500 centimeters. To perform the conversion, you do the following calculation:

$$5.0 \text{ meters} \times \frac{100 \text{ centimeters}}{1 \text{ meter}} = 500 \text{ centimeters}$$

Note that 100 centimeters divided by 1 meter equals 1 because there are 100 centimeters in a meter. In the calculation, the units you don't want — meters — cancel out.

---

**9.** How many centimeters are in 2.35 meters?

*Solve It*

**10.** How many seconds are in 1.25 minutes?

*Solve It*

11. How many inches are in 2.0 meters?

*Solve It*

12. How many grams are in 3.25 kg?

*Solve It*

## Converting through Multiple Units

Sometimes you have to make multiple conversions to get what you want. That demands multiple conversion factors. For example, if you want to convert from inches to meters, you can use the conversion that 2.54 centimeters equals 1 inch — but then you have to convert from centimeters to meters, which means using another conversion factor.

Try your hand at this example question that involves multiple conversions:



**Q.** Convert 10 inches into meters.

**A.** The correct answer is 0.254 m.

1. You know that 1 inch = 2.54 centimeters, so start with that conversion factor and convert 10 inches into centimeters:

$$10 \text{ in} \times \frac{2.54 \text{ cm}}{1 \text{ in}} = 25.4 \text{ cm}$$

2. Convert 25.4 cm into meters by using a second conversion factor:

$$25.4 \text{ cm} \times \frac{1 \text{ m}}{100 \text{ cm}} = 0.254 \text{ m}$$

## 12 Part I: Getting Started with Physics

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- 13.** Given that there are 2.54 centimeters in 1 inch, how many centimeters are there in 1 yard?

*Solve It*

- 14.** How many centimeters are in a kilometer?

*Solve It*

- 
- 15.** How many inches are in an angstrom, given that 1 angstrom ( $\text{\AA}$ ) =  $10^{-8}$  cm?

*Solve It*

- 16.** How many inches are in 3.0 meters, given that there are 2.54 cm in 1 inch?

*Solve It*



## Converting Times

Physics problems frequently ask you to convert between different units of time: seconds, minutes, hours, and even years. These times involve all kinds of calculations because measurements in physics books are usually in seconds, but can frequently be in hours.



**Q.** An SUV is traveling  $2.78 \times 10^{-2}$  kilometers per second. What's that in kilometers per hour?

**A.** The correct answer is 100 km/hr.

1. You know that there are 60 minutes in an hour, so start by converting from kilometers per second to kilometers per minute:

$$2.78 \times 10^{-2} \frac{\text{km}}{\text{sec}} \times \frac{60 \cancel{\text{sec}}}{1 \text{ minute}} = 1.67 \text{ km/minute}$$

2. Because there are 60 minutes in an hour, convert this to kilometers per hour using a second conversion factor:

$$\frac{1.67 \text{ km}}{1 \cancel{\text{minute}}} \times \frac{60 \cancel{\text{minutes}}}{1 \text{ hour}} = 100 \text{ km/hour}$$

**17.** How many hours are in 1 week?

*Solve It*

**18.** How many hours are in 1 year?

*Solve It*

## Counting Significant Figures

You may plug numbers into your calculator and come up with an answer like 1.532984529045, but that number isn't likely to please your instructor. Why? Because in physics problems, you use significant digits to express your answers. *Significant digits*, also often called *significant figures*, represent the accuracy with which you know your values.

For example, if you know only the values you're working with to two significant digits, your answer should be 1.5, which has two significant digits, not 1.532984529045, which has 13! Here's how it works: Suppose you're told that a skater traveled 10.0 meters in 7.0 seconds. Note the number of digits: The first value has three significant figures, the other only two. The rule is that when you multiply or divide numbers, the result has the number of significant digits that equals the smallest number of significant digits in any of the original numbers. So if you want to figure out how fast the skater was going, you divide 10.0 by 7.0, and the result should have only two significant digits — 1.4 meters per second.

On the other hand, when you're adding or subtracting numbers, the rule is that the last significant digit in the result corresponds to the last significant digit in the least accurate measurement. How does that work? Take a look at this addition example:

$$\begin{array}{r} 5.1 \\ 12 \\ + 7.73 \\ \hline 24.83 \end{array}$$

So is the result 24.83? No, it's not. The 12 has no significant digits to the right of the decimal point, so the answer shouldn't have any either. That means you should round the value of the result up to 25.



Zeros used just to fill out values down to (or up to) the decimal point aren't considered significant. For example, the number 3,600 has only two significant digits by default. That's not true if the value was actually measured to be 3,600, of course, in which case it's usually expressed as 3,600.; the final decimal indicates that all the digits are significant.

Rounding numbers in physics usually works the same way as it does in math: When you want to round to three places, for example, and the number in the fourth place is a five or greater, you add one to the third place (and ignore or replace with zeros any following digits).



- Q.** You're multiplying 12.01 by 9.7. What should your answer be, keeping in mind that you should express it in significant digits?
- A.** The correct answer is 120.
1. The calculator says the product is 116.497.
  2. The number of significant digits in your result is the same as the smallest number of significant digits in any of the values being multiplied. That's two here (because of 9.7), so your answer rounds up to 120.

- 19.** What is 19.3 multiplied by 26.12, taking into account significant digits?

*Solve It*

- 20.** What is the sum of 7.9, 19, and 5.654, taking into account significant digits?

*Solve It*

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## *Coming Prepared with Some Algebra*

It's a fact of life: You need to be able to do algebra to handle physics problems. Take the following equation, for example, which relates the distance something has traveled ( $s$ ) to its acceleration and the time it has been accelerated:

$$s = \frac{1}{2}at^2$$

Now suppose that the physics problem asks you for the acceleration, not the distance. You have to rearrange things a little here to solve for the acceleration. So when you multiply both sides by 2 and divide both sides by  $t^2$ , here's what you get:

$$\frac{2}{t^2} \cdot s = \frac{2}{t^2} \cdot \frac{1}{2}at^2$$

Cancelling out and swapping sides, you solve for  $a$  like this:

$$a = \frac{2s}{t^2}$$

So that's putting a little algebra to work. All you had to do was move variables around the equation to get what you wanted. The same approach works when solving physics problems (most of the time). On the other hand, what if you had to solve the same problem for the time,  $t$ ? You would do that by rearranging the variables like so:

$$t = \sqrt{2s/a}$$

The lesson in this example is that you can extract all three variables — distance, acceleration, and time — from the original equation. Should you memorize all three versions of this equation? Of course not. You can just memorize the first version and use a little algebra to get the rest.

The following practice questions call on your algebra skills:



**Q.** The equation for final speed,  $v_f$  — where the initial speed is  $v_o$ , the acceleration is  $a$ , and the time is  $t$  — is  $v_f = v_o + at$ . Solve for acceleration.

**A.** The correct answer is  $a = (v_f - v_o)/t$

To solve for  $a$ , divide both sides of the equation by time,  $t$ .

**21.** The equation for potential energy,  $PE$ , for a mass  $m$  at height  $h$ , where the acceleration due to gravity is  $g$ , is  $PE = mgh$ . Solve for  $h$ .

*Solve It*

**22.** The equation relating final speed,  $v_f$ , to original speed,  $v_o$ , in terms of acceleration  $a$  and distance  $s$  is  $v_f^2 = v_o^2 + 2as$ . Solve for  $s$ .

*Solve It*

23. The equation relating distance  $s$  to acceleration  $a$ , time  $t$ , and speed  $v$  is  $s = v_o t + \frac{1}{2} a t^2$ . Solve for  $v_o$ .

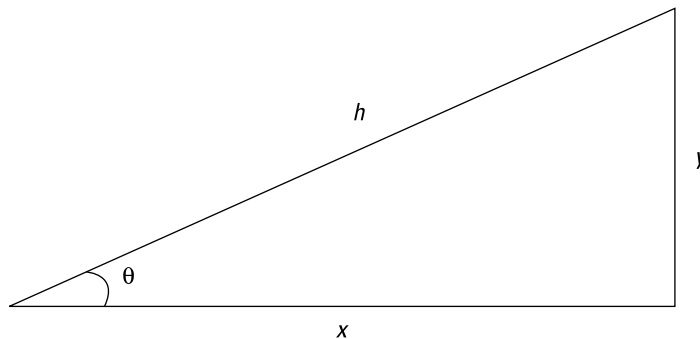
**Solve It**

24. The equation for kinetic energy is  $KE = \frac{1}{2} m v^2$ . Solve for  $v$ .

**Solve It**

## Being Prepared with Trigonometry

Physics problems also require you to have some trigonometry under your belt. To see what kind of trig you need, take a look at Figure 1-1, which shows a right triangle. The long side is called the *hypotenuse*, and the angle between  $x$  and  $y$  is  $90^\circ$ .



**Figure 1-1:**  
A triangle.

Physics problems require you to be able to work with sines, cosines, and tangents. Here's what they look like for Figure 1-1:

$$\sin \theta = y/h$$

$$\cos \theta = x/h$$

$$\tan \theta = y/x$$

You can find the length of one side of the triangle if you're given another side and an angle (not including the right angle). Here's how to relate the sides:

$$x = h \cos \theta = y/\tan \theta$$

$$y = h \sin \theta = x \tan \theta$$

$$h = y/\sin \theta = x/\cos \theta$$

And here's one more equation, the Pythagorean theorem. It gives you the length of the hypotenuse when you plug in the other two sides:

$$h = \sqrt{x^2 + y^2}$$

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- 25.** Given the hypotenuse  $h$  and the angle  $\theta$ , what is the length  $x$  equal to?

*Solve It*

- 26.** If  $x = 3$  m and  $y = 4$  m, what is the length of  $h$ ?

*Solve It*