What gradients are and how they change shape-to-shape

The gradient is the steepness of the line. In other words, this means how 'fast' the line is moving up, compared to how fast it is moving across. Put in technical maths language, this really means:

> The rate that x is changing at compared to y

The gradient measures how one variable changes in relation to another

When we say 'the rate' we mean 'how much'. Some tricky words, there. But let's see it in action. You remember line graphs, right? Something like this:
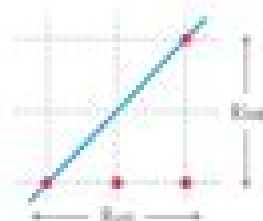

And she has this sort of equation:

$$y = mx + c$$

Where c is the y-intercept and m is the gradient.

> Linear gradients stay constant. That means they never change.

Linear graphs are graphs with one straight line. They therefore have a constant gradient.
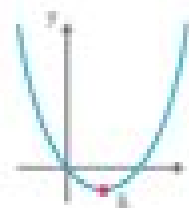
You can find the gradient using rise/run. Because the gradient is the same at any point on the line, you can do this calculation from any two points on the graph.

But don't stop there – you remember parabolas, don't you? They have this sort of equation:
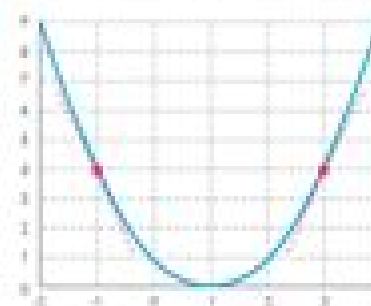
$$y = ax^2 + bx + c$$

...and they look like this:

So, how do we work out the gradient?

On a parabola, the gradient is found by drawing a straight line at a tangent to the graph at a specific point. In case you don't remember from last year, a tangent is simply a line that touches the graph exactly once. The gradient of this line is how we describe the gradient of the parabola at each point:

Do you see a problem yet? Unlike on a straight line graph, the gradient is not the same everywhere. In fact, there are actually no two points where the gradient is the same.

Not only this, but there are positive and negative gradients on the same graph. Remember that:

> Non-linear or curved lines have gradients that change.

But what's the gradient at point B on our initial parabola? Zero! At that tiny wee point, the line is actually flat.

Guide For Vittal Maths Calculus

Frederick H. Soon

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