

A Guide to “Physics-ing”

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May 11, 2017

1 Who and What this guide is for

This document is meant as a guide to help you succeed in your physics courses. Specifically, it explains good practices in doing physics problems and demonstrates a generally reliable approach to solving them. It is intended primarily for students who are new to the study of physics, though the advice in this document is applicable for problems encountered in a wide range of physics courses.

2 What is Physics?

For a lot of students, the phrase “nightmare” comes to mind when thinking about physics, at least initially. This, of course, is not what physics actually is. It is difficult to define exactly what physics is, but much of it can be described as the study of matter and energy. Physics is both broad and deep - it includes mass, energy and interactions between them; electromagnetism; gravity; time; everything from planets to subatomic particles; and many other things. However, while physics as a whole is intricate, complex, and not easily definable, *doing* physics is actually much simpler. Essentially, the act of doing physics is an extensive exercise in *reasoning* and *problem solving*. Physics is, of course, not the only area where these skills are applied; where physics differs from many other areas where problem solving and reasoning are applied is that physics uses mathematics extensively.

3 So How do I do Physics?

To someone who is not accustomed to thinking like a physicist, the process of solving a physics problem can seem like madness – especially for those who find math frustrating – but there is a method to it. This method is sometimes referred to as the “ICE” method: Identify/Illustrate,

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Compute/Calculate, and Evaluate/Explain. The closely related “I SEE” method (Identify, Set Up, Execute, Evaluate) is used in Ref. [1]; the two describe essentially the same process to take in solving a physics problem, apart from how they group the process into steps that are easily remembered. In this document the ICE method will be used.

One source of difficulty for learning physics is that the problem statements are often very dense – there is a lot of crucial information expressed in a small number of words. This information needs to be identified and implications drawn from it. Thus, one should be prepared to read a physics problem carefully and possibly several times over.

Take the following problem as an example:

Problem: a car is traveling around a level, circular highway off-ramp with a radius R . Given that the coefficient of static friction between the tires and the road is μ_s , what is the maximum speed v_{\max} that the driver can have on this off-ramp without losing traction and sliding?

Now let’s unpack this problem using the ICE method.

3.1 Identify/Illustrate:

The first part of doing physics is knowing what the problem is – this means we need to know what the situation in the problem is and what is to be solved for. The situation consists of all the known information in the problem, including pieces of information that are stated explicitly and implicitly. The thing we are to solve for is almost always some quantity (e.g. mass of a certain object or time between two events) related to the situation.

In the Identify/Illustrate section, first we identify this information. Next, we draw a diagram – drawing a diagram is always helpful, as it serves as a visual link between the problem being solved and the math used to solve it. Finally, we make assumptions which allow us to apply the formulas that are valid under those assumptions.

Identifying the information in the problem

We now extract the given information in our problem. Note that something being known does not necessarily mean we have an exact value for it. It could mean, as it does in the following case, that the quantity will be treated as if we had an exact value for it. Once the variable to solved for is expressed in terms of only numbers and known variables, the problem is solved.

In this example problem we seek to determine v_{\max} , the maximum velocity that the car can obtain on the circular path before sliding off. The following information is given:

- R , the radius of the circle (which the car travels around),
- μ_s , the coefficient of static friction (between the tires and the road).

Additionally, we are given the following information (explicitly or implicitly):

- the car is in uniform circular motion (this is very important – it affects many aspects of the problem, in ways which will be shown later in the process of solving this problem)
- air resistance against the car is considered negligible (this is always assumed unless otherwise stated in the problem)
- the only forces that are acting on the car are the force of friction between the car’s tires and the road surface, the gravitational force pulling the car down and the normal force pushing the car up.

Drawing a picture (Yes, art in physics!)

We begin by drawing a large picture that includes the following items

- a sketch of the situation, which includes all the objects relevant to the question (labeled clearly),
- a coordinate system (the purpose of which is to label and orient the axes),
- a free body diagram (FBD) of all the forces acting on each object,
- important quantities, which could include mass, velocity, acceleration, and position, among others; these will need to be labeled for each object.

Fig. 1 below shows us how to draw such a picture for the problem that we are trying to solve.

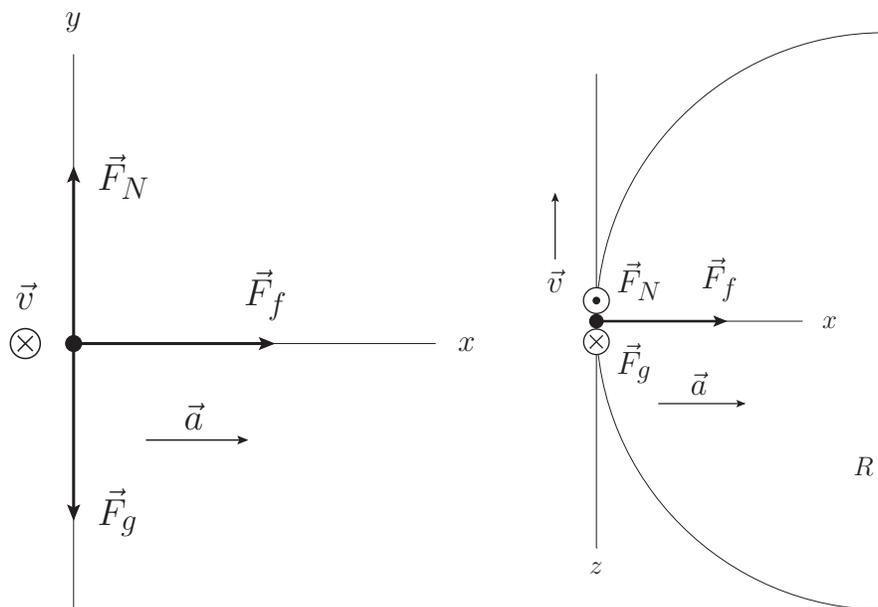


Figure 1: FBD’s for the car in this problem, which is represented as a solid black dot. The left is an FBD viewed from the side, the right is an FBD viewed from above. By convention the \odot and \otimes respectively represent vectors that point out of and in to the page. The reason that we have chosen this coordinate system will be discussed later.

Notice that the picture in Fig. 1 is large enough so that all of these items are included and are clearly discernible. Note that even though some of the aforementioned quantities are vectors, we did *not* draw them on the FDB—an FDB should include only forces. Instead, we drew them just next to the object.

Assumptions and Applicable Formulas

The car is traveling along a circular path at a constant speed, so it is in uniform circular motion. In order to describe this motion we must chose an appropriate coordinate system. The *circular symmetry* of the car’s motion implies that we should use radial and tangential coordinates. Relative to the instantaneous position of the car along its circular path, the radial direction points toward the center whereas the tangential direction points in the direction of the car’s velocity vector. The vertical direction is defined to point upward from the instantaneous position of the car in a direction that is perpendicular to the road’s surface.

The circular symmetry of the car’s motion also means that there is nothing special about any particular position along the circular path. We are free to chose any location and analyze the car’s motion while it is at that spot. This freedom is what allowed us to arbitrarily chose the car’s location to be that which is shown in Fig. 1. We have defined a Cartesian coordinate system there: the origin is at the location of the car, the positive x axis is parallel to the radial direction, the positive y axis is parallel to the vertical direction, and the positive z axis is anti-parallel to the tangential direction (ie. pointing in the opposite direction of the car’s velocity vector). Furthermore, we assume that the circular path that the car moves along is completely horizontal. This mean that the car’s motion is entirely in the xz plane in Fig. 1.

Because the car is moving at a constant speed along a circular path, we also know that the car’s acceleration vector points from the car’s location to the centre of the circular path. This is the radial acceleration (also called the centripetal acceleration), which is given by

$$a_{\text{rad}} = \frac{v_{\text{tan}}^2}{R}, \tag{1}$$

where v_{tan} is the tangential component of the car’s instantaneous velocity vector, which points in the negative z direction in the coordinate system used in Fig. 1. We are looking for the *maximum sustainable speed* of the car around the curve such that the car does not slide, which we will call v_{max} . We can assume the car is not speeding up or slowing down, and so the car’s speed is constant. Importantly, this does not mean the car’s *velocity* \vec{v}_{max} is constant – in fact, it certainly is not because the direction of the car’s velocity will change as it travels around the curve even though the speed remains constant.

Despite having a non-constant velocity, we know that the car’s speed in the direction it is going remains constant. This means that *its acceleration vector cannot have a component in the direction that the car is moving*. This implies that $a_{\text{tan}} = 0$, which means that $a_z = 0$ in Fig. 1. In addition, the car is not moving in the vertical direction, so $a_y = 0$ in Fig. 1. Therefore, since the net acceleration \vec{a} is the vector sum of all components of the acceleration,

$$\vec{a} = \vec{a}_{\text{rad}}, \quad a_x = a_{\text{rad}} = \frac{v_{\text{max}}^2}{R}, \tag{2}$$

where \vec{a} is purely in the x direction, as shown in Fig. 1.

Friction plays a crucial role in this problem, so it is useful to review it. The coefficient of kinetic friction is a characteristic of the materials that are in contact and the way they are being moved against each other. For any two materials under normal circumstances, they will either be slipping against each other (kinetic friction, μ_k), not moving relative to each other (static friction, μ_s), or (at least) one will be rolling on the other (rolling friction, μ_r). Here, we wish to find v_{\max} such that the tire does not *slip* or *slide* away from the car's circular path; this is different from rolling. Pushing a car sideways, one would have to overcome static friction; pushing a car forwards, one would have to overcome rolling friction. Rolling friction certainly occurs between the car's tires and the road surface; however, it does not serve to keep the car moving along a circular path. Therefore, static friction is relevant to this problem whereas kinetic and rolling friction are irrelevant.

3.2 Compute/Calculate:

Newton's second law tells us that

$$\Sigma \vec{F} = m\vec{a}, \quad (3)$$

and by definition, the net force is the sum of all forces acting on an object, so in this problem

$$\Sigma \vec{F} = \vec{F}_N + \vec{F}_g + \vec{F}_f. \quad (4)$$

The net force, as with any vector, can be expressed in terms of its components

$$\Sigma \vec{F} = \Sigma F_x \hat{i} + \Sigma F_y \hat{j} + \Sigma F_z \hat{k}, \quad (5)$$

where \hat{i} , \hat{j} and \hat{k} are the usual Cartesian basis vectors corresponding to the Cartesian coordinate system in Fig. 1. As described previously, there is no acceleration in the y direction or the z direction, so Eqn. 3 tells us that the net force is purely in the x direction

$$\Sigma \vec{F} = \Sigma F_x \hat{i}, \quad (6)$$

which is why we chose to align the x axis as we did in Fig. 1. Note that we can apply Eqn. 4 to the x components of each force,

$$\Sigma F_x = F_{N,x} + F_{g,x} + F_{f,x} = F_f, \quad (7)$$

where the normal force as well as force of gravity have been eliminated because their x components are zero, and the force of friction is purely in the x direction, as can be seen in Fig. 1. Because the car's acceleration is in the x direction, Newton's second law 3 tells us that

$$F_f = ma_x = \frac{mv_{\max}^2}{R}, \quad (8)$$

where we have used Eqn. 2. The magnitude of the force of static friction is related to the magnitude of the normal force by the equation

$$F_f \leq \mu_s F_N, \quad (9)$$

but here the speed of the car is as large as it can be without the car slipping, so

$$F_f = \mu_s F_N. \quad (10)$$

We can combine this with Eqn. 8 to give

$$\mu_s F_N = \frac{mv_{\max}^2}{R}. \quad (11)$$

We can now apply Eqn. 4 to the y components. Recalling that the acceleration vector has no y component, Eqns. 3 and 5 imply that

$$\Sigma F_y = F_{N,y} + F_{g,y} + F_{f,y} = 0. \quad (12)$$

As can be seen in Fig. 1, the friction force has no y component, the normal force is perpendicular to the road surface in the positive y direction, and the gravitational force is perpendicular to the road surface in the negative y direction, so

$$F_N - F_g = 0 \quad \rightarrow \quad F_N = mg, \quad (13)$$

where we have used $F_g = mg$. Finally, the z components of all of the forces in Fig. 1 are zero, so the z component version of Eqn. 4 does not provide any useful information.

At this point, we collect all the equations we have found and combine them to get an equation or system of equations which relates what we know with what we want to find, which in this case is v_{\max} . Notice that we earlier combined several of the equations we found to create new equations. This means most of our work is done already.

First, we substitute Eqn. 13 into Eqn. 8, which gives

$$\mu_s mg = \frac{mv_{\max}^2}{R}. \quad (14)$$

Solving this for v_{\max} gives us our final answer:

$$\boxed{v_{\max} = \sqrt{\mu_s g R}}. \quad (15)$$

3.3 Evaluate (does your answer pass the “sniff test”?)

The last step is to evaluate the answer: Is it plausible? Does it make sense? There are several ways, which work well for many physics problems, to check whether your answer is reasonable.

Dimensional Analysis

Physics deals with quantities that can be measured. In mechanics, all quantities can be expressed in terms of length, time and mass, each of which is called a *dimension* and has its own unit. Equations must be dimensionally consistent, which means that the units on both sides must be the same. We can apply this to Eqn. 15: do the units of the expression on the left hand side match the units of the expression on the right hand side?

- The units on the left hand side are speed units, which in SI units are m/s.
- In order to determine the units on the right hand side, recall that μ_s has no units, g has units of m/s^2 , so the right hand side has units of $\sqrt{\text{m} \times \text{m/s}^2} = \sqrt{\text{m}^2/\text{s}^2} = \text{m/s}$. Hence Eqn. 15 is dimensionally consistent.

Value-changing

How does v_{\max} change if something related is changed?

- As R increases, v_{\max} increases, which is expected since a larger R implies a bigger curve, which is easier to round than a smaller curve.
- If μ_s increases, so does v_{\max} . This is expected since a higher coefficient of static friction implies the tires and the road stick together more firmly. This means it will be harder for the car to slip on the road, which allows a higher maximum speed for the car.
- If g increases, so does v_{\max} , which is expected since a higher gravitational pull means the tires and road are pressed together more firmly. This also means it will be harder to slip, which again allows a higher maximum speed.
- Notice that v_{\max} does not depend on m . This may seem counter-intuitive or perhaps even wrong. A semi-truck, for example, could conceivably need to round the curve more slowly than a sports car. However, mass is not the culprit here; other factors such as centre of gravity, vehicle length, engine power, and lower-quality tires would account for the truck driver needing to take the curve more slowly. Furthermore, since the road is flat, an empty semi-truck could take the curve at about the same speed as a loaded semi-truck, so it makes sense that v_{\max} does not depend on m .

Estimation by Intuition

If we have (or give) reasonable values to the known variables in your problem, is the calculated value for our target variable (v_{\max}) reasonable?

- A reasonable μ_s for tires on a wet road is 0.2 (see for instance Ref. [2]).
- We recall that g is the acceleration due to gravity. On the surface of the earth $g = 9.8 \text{ m/s}^2$ (some professors will use $g = 9.81 \text{ m/s}^2$ or $g = 10 \text{ m/s}^2$).
- A mid-sized roundabout, like the ones found in Abbotsford, might have a radius of approximately $R = 25 \text{ m}$.
- Using these values gives us $v_{\max} = \sqrt{(0.2)(9.8 \text{ m/s}^2)(25 \text{ m})} = 7.0 \text{ m/s}$. This can be converted to kilometers per hour as follows:

$$v_{\max} = 7.0 \text{ m/s} \times \frac{1.0 \text{ km}}{1.0 \times 10^3 \text{ m}} \times \frac{60 \text{ s}}{1.0 \text{ min}} \times \frac{60 \text{ min}}{1.0 \text{ hr}} = 25 \text{ km/hr}.$$

On a wet road this seems reasonable; going double this speed would pose an appreciable risk of slipping, while going half this speed should not cause slipping unless there is ice.

4 So Now I Can do Physics?

YES! If you have managed to read this far, you probably either know it all already, or have learned something new, or reinforced what you already knew. The physics problem worked through in this example covers many of the topics discussed in an introductory mechanics course (such as PHYS 083, 093, 101, or 111), and the process is applicable to many different types of

physics problems. The last step is to apply this method to your own assignment and enjoy the resulting stream of “A+”s!

If you are ever stuck, there are tutors available to help you in the UFV Academic Success Centre, room G126 (Abbotsford campus) or A1212 (CEP). In addition, do not hesitate to ask your instructor: everyone in the physics department loves to help students learn physics!

Acknowledgements

CM and RK thank the Academic Success Centre for enthusiastic support of this project, as well as Dr. Jeff Chizma and Dr. Tim Cooper from the UFV Physics department for helpful comments.

References

- [1] Young, H. D. & Freedman, R. A. (2014) *Sears and Zemansky's University Physics with Modern Physics* (13th ed.). 1301 Sansome Street, San Fransisco, CA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- [2] http://www.engineeringtoolbox.com/friction-coefficients-d_778.html