

Groups: Their Presentations and Representations

**COURSE NOTES FOR
MATH337**

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How does this differ from other introductions to group theory?

It is usual to introduce students to group theory via a course on groups, rings and fields rather than group theory in isolation. It is generally felt that students benefit from the parallel between the axiomatic development of groups and rings. Regrettably students do not see it that way and fail to be excited by a parallel between one unfamiliar theory and another.

These notes confine themselves to group theory with the aim of giving the student a wide experience there. By the time they learn about rings the parallel will be between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

But it might be objected that this will result in students learning more group theory than they need as an undergraduate. Certainly it would be a mistake to lead students into the technical depths of the subject, but there is a lot of room for breadth. What an undergraduate needs is a wide variety of mathematical experiences, and group theory can provide a lot of these.

The obvious experience is that of the development of an axiomatic system. Historically, group theory was the forerunner in this “modern” approach to mathematics. And because there are few axioms and a wide variety of different types of examples students appreciate the experience of axiomatic abstraction within group theory much better than they do in many other areas, such as the theory of vector spaces.

Instead of merely illustrating the definitions and theorems with a few well-chosen examples we have attempted to inundate the student with such a variety of examples that they come to value the theory as a way of organizing this wide experience.

But mathematics is in the process of making another turn and group theory is once again one of the leaders. Computation has moved from merely being a tool to being integrated into the theoretical development. Far from being a specialist area within group theory, computational group theory has become mainstream. And similar things are starting to happen in other areas of mathematics.

This has shifted the emphasis somewhat from the axioms to the description of a group through generators and relations. Of course only finitely presented groups are accessible in this way and often groups arise independently of any particular presentation. But many important groups that arise in applications do so as a presentation.

This justifies the inclusion of a chapter on the Todd-Coxeter algorithm. It is by no means a recent thing but it has become increasingly important. With the accompanying discussion of the Word Problem (stated but not proved here) it also has the merit of introducing the student to the idea of the non-computable within a purely mathematical context. (Somehow to a mathematician the unsolvability of the Word Problem seems to hit home more than the unsolvability of the Halting Problem despite the two being equivalent.)

Group presentations can be accepted quite readily at an intuitive level, which is the way they are first introduced and used. A later chapter develops the concept via free groups in a more rigorous way. Another chapter, on infinite abelian groups, provides a valuable contrast to this computational flavour and provides an excuse for talking about Zorn's Lemma.

Another topic, which is normally considered too advanced for an introductory course on group theory, is representation theory. This is because a completely self-contained account really needs a fair knowledge of rings and modules. However the deepest aspects can be isolated into a single Fundamental Theorem of Characters ("the irreducible character form an orthonormal basis for the space of class functions") which can be taken on faith just as the Fundamental Theorem of Algebra is when complex numbers are first encountered. From there everything can be built up with the help of a fair bit of standard linear algebra, thereby reinforcing the student's, often patchy, knowledge. The other benefit that has been found is that in constructing the character table for a group the student has to integrate a lot of elementary group theory. In particular the act of inducing characters from quotient groups in specific examples has been shown to cement the idea of a quotient group in a way that no amount of theory can.

These notes have been used quite effectively in conjunction with an individual project where each student receives the presentation of a group (a non-abelian group of order 16). The task is first to use the Todd-Coxeter algorithm to produce a group table and then, largely by examining the quotient structure and using the technique of inducing characters from quotient groups, construct the character table for their group. It has been found that because each student is working with their own presentation, and because so much structure seems to miraculously grow from such a tiny "seed" they are generally highly motivated and come away from the course with a much better grasp of the subject than with the traditional theorem-proof approach.

That is not to say that there are no proofs. Indeed everything used here is proved with the exception of the Fundamental Theorem of Characters and the Unsolvability of the Word Problem. It is just that the emphasis is a little more on doing than proving.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION TO GROUPS

1.1 Group Theory: The Door to Abstract Mathematics	9
1.2 The Dutch Wife's Mattress Problem	12
1.3 The Dihedral Group of Order 8	14
1.4 Groups and Mail Sorting	16
1.5 Groups and the Kinship System of the Warlpiri Aboriginal Tribe	17
1.6 Galois Says (A Children's Party Game)	18
1.7 Galois and His Groups	19
Exercises	20
Solutions	21

2. PERMUTATIONS

2.1 Shuffling a Pack of Cards	23
2.2 Multiplying Shuffles	24
2.3 Permutations	26
2.4 Cycle Notation	27
2.5 Cycle Structure	28
2.6 Definition of Multiplication	29
2.7 Cycle Multiplication	30
2.8 Powers of Permutations	31
2.9 Order of a Permutation	31
2.10 Conjugates	32
2.11 Ringing the Changes	33
2.12 Disorder and Sorting	35
2.13 Odd and Even Permutations	36
2.14 Permutation Puzzles	37
2.15 The Shunting Puzzle	38
2.16 Permutation Puzzle Techniques.....	39
Exercises	41
Solutions	44

3. EXAMPLES OF GROUPS

3.1 Abstract Groups and the Group Axioms	49
3.2 Subgroups	50
3.3 Groups of Numbers	50
3.4 Groups of Permutations	53
3.5 Groups of Polynomials, Functions and Vectors	54
3.6 Groups of Matrices.....	56
3.7 Symmetry Groups	57
3.8 Group Tables	59
3.9 Group Presentations	60
Exercises	62
Solutions	64

4. FIRST STEPS IN THE THEORY

4.1 A Catalogue of All Groups: The Impossible Dream	69
4.2 Additive and Multiplicative Notation	70
4.3 Basic Properties of Groups	70
4.4 Powers	71
4.5 Cyclic Groups	72
4.6 Subgroups	73
4.7 Cosets and Lagrange's Theorem	73
4.8 Dihedral Groups	75
4.9 Dihedral Arithmetic	75
4.10 Groups of Order $2p$	76
Exercises	77
Solutions	81

5. THE TODD-COXETER ALGORITHM

5.1 Presentations	91
5.2 Chains and Links	92
5.3 The Restricted Todd-Coxeter Algorithm	93
5.4 Examples of the Todd-Coxeter Algorithm	97
5.5 Why Does It Work?	104
5.6 Todd-Coxeter Strategies	105
5.7 The Unsolvability of the Word Problem	106
5.8 Direct Products	109
Exercises	113
Solutions	114

6. A SECOND ROUND OF THEORY

6.1 Groups of Cosets	119
6.2 Normal Subgroups and Quotient Groups	119
6.3 Homomorphisms	121
6.4 Isomorphism Theorems	123
6.5 Conjugacy Classes	124
6.6 Commutators	126
6.7 The Derived Subgroup	127
Exercises	128
Solutions	129

7. REPRESENTATIONS OF FINITE GROUPS

7.1 A Quick Review of Relevant Linear Algebra	131
7.2 Representations	131
7.3 Characters of Groups	133
7.4 Class Functions	136
7.5 The Fundamental Theorem of Characters	137
7.6 Character Tables	138
7.7 Constructing New Characters from Existing Ones	140
7.8 Character Tables of Cyclic Groups	141
7.9 Inducing Up from Quotient Groups	141
7.10 Character Tables of Abelian Groups	142
7.11 Character Tables of Dihedral Groups	143
7.12 Character Tables of Symmetric Groups	144
Exercises	145
Solutions	147

8. GROUPS ACTING ON SETS

8.1 Representation Theories	151
8.2 Actions of Groups on Sets.....	151
8.3 Orbits	153
8.4 Cauchy's Theorem	153
8.5 The Sylow Theorems	154
Exercises	155
Solutions	156

9. FREE GROUPS

9.1 Free Groups	157
9.2 Presentations of Groups	159
9.3 Subgroups of Free Groups	160
9.4 The Todd-Coxeter Algorithm Revisited	162
9.5 Coset Enumeration	162
9.6 Subgroups of Finite Index	163

10. SOLUBLE GROUPS

10.1 The Derived Series	167
10.2 Simple Groups	168
10.3 Commutator Presentations	169
10.4 Power-Commutator Presentations	170
10.5 Calculations Using Power-Commutator Presentations	171

11. ABELIAN GROUPS

11.1 Finitely Presented Abelian Groups	173
11.2 Elementary Row Operations	174
11.3 Elementary Column Operations	175
11.4 The Fundamental Theorem of Finitely-Generated Abelian Groups	176
11.5 Euler's Theorem	178
11.6 Some Important Subgroups of an Abelian Group	179
11.7 The Order Profile of a Finite Abelian Group	180
11.8 The Alexander Group of a Knot	182

12. INFINITE ABELIAN GROUPS

12.1 Examples of Infinite Abelian Groups	185
12.2 The Torsion Subgroup	186
12.3 The Prüfer Groups	187
12.4 Divisible Groups	188
12.5 Zorn's Lemma	189
12.6 Divisible Subgroups	191

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: GROUPS OF SMALL ORDER	195
APPENDIX B: CHARACTER TABLE SUMMARY	198
APPENDIX C: A GROUP OF ORDER 12	199
APPENDIX D: GROUP PRESENTATIONS FOR GROUPS OF ORDER 16	205